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A PROBLEM OF IDENTITY:

WHO ARE YOU WHEN YOU'RE BEING WELL PAID FOR IT?

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I. Mental Set of English Teachers (Why not Professors of Composition and Rhetoric?

An English teacher who puts on the consultant's hat may be surprised, unpleasantly, at how unnatural it feels. The unnaturalness has numerous causes. A few of those causes and a few possible solutions to the self-identity problem are briefly discussed in this paper.

First, the "mental set" of the English teacher is not well suited for consulting work. People who teach composition, whether in secondary education or at the college level, think of themselves as English teachers: the grey-haired "battle-ax" we all dreaded as school children. We rarely think of ourselves as rhetoricians, composition specialists, or as professors of composition and rhetoric. We must describe ourselves in new ways if we are to do new work.

Like other professionals, we value ourselves, at least in part, according to what we are paid. And we are grossly underpaid. When I teach at a local community college, my wage per class hour is $18.00. If I spend five hours for each class hour, for a total of six hours of work, I earn $3.00 per hour--below the minimum wage. If I spend less than five, my students do not learn as much as they should, nor do I teach as well as I could. To earn a living at this rate of pay requires working nights and weekends, without overtime pay, of course. These conditions naturally color our image of ourselves.

Because we have grown accustomed to being underpaid and overworked, we expect nothing else. We even compete fiercely with one another for the opportunity to be overworked and underpaid. I once competed with several hundred other recent Ph.D.'s for a guaranteed "burn-out" job in an unscenic location which would have paid me $11,000 a year. Why did I waste the stamp? The job shortage in our profession has made fools of some of us. We do what no self-respecting garbage-collector or pipe-fitter would ever do: we work

for nothing.

Those of us who finished degrees before the current wave of specialization in composition have an additional strain on our self-images. Although we have experience teaching writing--and experience is finally what counts--we are not equipped with the latest jargon in our field. We are not armed with readability tables and psycholinguistic theories--at least not last month's versions. We lack the mystique of the incomprehensible specialist.

All of this is compounded by certain invisible economic barriers that hold us back. Our aims are low. We hope some day to make as much money as our colleagues who have been at it for twenty years: maybe $20,000, just before we retire. The upper limit in our economic universe is the salary of our chairperson: perhaps $25,000. In a larger department, perhaps $35,000. Many will try for $30,000, few will ever receive it. So we look upwards a very little.

To a significant extent, our future is limited by our short sight. We confine ourselves. What we cannot imagine, we are not likely to achieve. What might we imagine?

II. The Basis For A New Self-Image

We might see ourselves in a broader context, a larger, more prosperous world, as an essential factor in U.S. business and industry. We have a skill, honed by years of drudgery, that business and industry needs and does not have. There is more work to be done outside of our academic institutions than inside of them. And we could be paid more for it outside of them, than inside.

In terms of absolute cost, we are presently teaching writing in the least expensive way--in colleges and universities where the public bears a large part of the expense and where we are willing to work long days for small salaries. Outside of this nonprofit sector, this protected environment, our services have a greater absolute cost--and thus a greater value to us. If I spend one hour with a practicing lawyer and charge $50 (a moderate figure), that lawyer will think it is a bargain (because his hourly rate is higher). I will think it is a bonus because my university pays me an average of $10 per hour for my work with law students. The economic picture is not so simple as that, of course, but it's safe to say that our work is worth three times more outside than inside of our academic institutions.

III. Some Principles of Successful Consulting

How do we harvest that profit? Choose a business or industry compatible with your interest or experience. The more familiar you are with it, the more effective your work will be. The key here is to know the "terrain" before you travel over it. Every business, industry, and profession has its own kinds of written communication, its own language, and to some extent its own style of writing. Offer your services only after you know exactly what you would be working with and what specific help you can offer.

Try to identify communication problems that are commonly complained of within the business or profession. This might be done by simply asking people

who work within an organization to tell you what their communication problems are. Acquire copies of typical written work. Map out the lines of written communication: Who assigns writing tasks? Who writes? Who receives? Who edits? Who proofreads? Who types? Who reads? Who complains about ambiguity or clarity problems? How are such complaints handled? How much time do the writers have? What type of mechanical assistance do they have (word processor, dictating machines)?

When you have mapped the terrain, then decide how to approach it. First attempt to solve the communication problems currently complained of within the organization. Then address the other inefficiencies in written communication that you, with your special expertise, perceive and can solve.

As you research, pay attention to what people inside the business or profession charge for their work or are paid by their companies. Discover what the hourly rates or salaries are of the people you wish to work for. Discover what they pay other consultants. Set your hourly rates according to the "going rate" in that business. Be careful not to undercharge. To some extent, people value services according to their cost. If you charge too little, your work may be undervalued. Of course, if you charge too much, you may have no work. The problem is obvious: once you have set an hourly rate, it is hard to increase it, and it may be too late to decrease it.

If you are charging enough--which from an English teacher's point of view may seem to be a great deal--you will want to offer "full value." This may lead to offering too much. When working outside of your own field, you must simplify. Concepts and approaches must be simplified. Terminology of the grammarian must be carefully defined, perhaps even omitted. Begin at the beginning: Outside of our field, people do not necessarily know the difference between "good" and "well" and probably do not know how to locate the subject and verb in a sentence or how to distinguish between restrictive and nonrestrictive phrases and clauses. Normally, a "lay" audience will not know the difference between a phrase and a clause. So begin at the very beginning. Do not try to impress your audience with technicalities or with the latest findings of psycholinguists and researchers in readability. You may want to toss a term or two in for "window dressing," to establish your "credit" as a specialist, but do not try to teach anything with such language. When you begin your real work, keep it simple and practical.

I do not mean to suggest that creating an "aura" or "mystique" is a waste of time. The contrary is true. You must have what Artistotle termed "ethical appeal" if you are to succeed. Consulting success depends on image as much as on expertise. Above all, you must sound "correct," you must speak grammatically, and you must communicate clearly in writing and orally. You must in your own articulation serve as an example of what you are "selling." But there are two phases to a consultant's work: the first is selling oneself--the "image"; the second is providing a service--the "expertise." In the second phase, always simplify, that is, try to teach a few basic things well.

IV. How To Establish Credibility

Before you have the opportunity to teach a few basic things well, you must get the job. Consulting work depends on "credibility." You must establish a reputation outside of your field. How might this be done?

Institutional service is one way to begin. Most colleges and universities offer lectures on a wide range of topics. A list of faculty members willing to lecture as a public service is kept somewhere, perhaps in an office of lectures and concerts. Add you name to the list. Even though you will not be paid directly, you will enhance your academic reputation as well as reaching out into the non-academic world. If you wish to work in a business or profession, contact the continuing education personnel in the appropriate department or school in your institution. If you contribute to a seminar as a panel member, for example, the notice that will be mailed to alumni and interested parties will provide free advertising for you. If a business school advertises your name in this way, for example, you will have established a measure of "credibility" without much effort, and no cost. Then, of course, you must perform well. That in large part (as discussed above) depends on knowing your audience.

Another way to begin is to investigate continuing education programs within a business or profession. Workshops are regularly offered in nearly every field of work. Good speakers and useful topics are hard to find. Our topic is in vogue at present; it enjoys a cyclical popularity, which is currently at its height. If you do find yourself on a panel for a lecture series or workshop, you may discover that what you have to say is the most useful part of the entire program. Since you will probably be the "odd speaker," that is, the only "lay" person on a panel, you will have built-in "visibility." This can be a tremendous advantage. Here again, while you will probably not be paid for this work, the advertising is invaluable. It is advertising without the stigma of advertising.

That raises the question of whether or not to advertise in newspapers or elsewhere, that is, paid, public advertising. I do not recommend it. It is expensive and may actually reduce your credibility. If your advertisement is positioned next to that of a local astrologer, a hypnotist, or a computer dating service, you may invite the wrong kind of attention. The best advertising is word-of-mouth, the personal reference. Use the business card provided by your academic institution (you will probably have to pay for it) and distribute it sparingly. Do not project a "slick" image. Such an image contradicts basic assumptions that most people have about English teachers. While we must improve our <u>self</u>-image in order to work profitably outside of our field, we may still make good use of the public image we have. We need not dress at the height of fashion; that may even interfere with our credibility. We need not spend $300 on an impressive briefcase. We need not fly first-class. We may, if we wish, without suffering any diminution of our image in the outside world, travel economically and dress plainly.

On the other hand, we should adopt the same professional standards as our clients in business matters. For example, we should use the same format for correspondence. If the professionals you wish to work for send memoranda to one another, then send memoranda, not letters. Return telephone calls the instant you return to your office, not several days later. Send follow-up letters, if that is customary. Keep a precise time-sheet for all work that you do; bill promptly and specifically, providing exact times, dates, names, and the nature of the work you have done. Remember that as employees in a non-profit sector of the economy, we are not accustomed to thinking of minutes as economic units. Time is money in a "for-profit" organization. Your minutes as a consultant are correspondingly valuable.

If consulting work goes well, you may find that you have too much to do: your teaching and your "field work" outside the academic world may add up to an 80-hour week. Like any other professional, you should consider doing first the things that pay you best. Everyone else does. This obviously not a sufficient reason for grossly neglecting students; but, in these inflationary times with academic salaries as low as they are and will remain, we are justified in diverting some of our professional time and energy to work that pays well. After all, if your students do not receive all that you have to offer, in the classroom, perhaps they will, some years down the line, have to hire you as a consultant.